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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001238

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [ASEC](#) [SOCI](#) [IR](#) [IZ](#)  
SUBJECT: KARBALA SECURITY IN QUESTION AS GOVERNMENT DRIFTS

REF: A. BAGHDAD 1095  
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 1075  
[1](#)C. 08 BAGHDAD 2492

Classified By: PRT Team Leader John KinCannon for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala reporting cable.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: There is a widespread perception among Karbalans that security here is eroding. Crime has increased, as have reports of extremists and weapons moving into the province. The new provincial leadership appears detached and disinterested in addressing problems. Maneuvering by Karbala's Iraqi Police (IP) commander to keep his job may be hurting the force's readiness. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority here seeks to remain on the path to normalcy. We are hopeful that the involvement of Sadrists and ISCI members in the political process will prove effective in dissuading the disaffected fringe from resorting to violence. End Summary.

#### Karbalans Feel Less Secure

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[1](#)2. (C) Over the last several weeks, contacts representing a broad cross-section of Karbala society have confided to us that they believe security here is eroding. Many point to rising crime to support their claims. Although reliable statistics are hard to come by, knowledgeable contacts within the provincial government say that property crimes including burglary and vandalism are increasing as the province recovers economically and daily life returns to a semblance of normalcy (ref B). In early May, an IP spokesman announced the arrest of a "gang" specializing in robbing women's hairdressing salons. A police academy instructor reports that prostitution and gambling are becoming more widespread as pilgrims flock to Karbala in greater numbers. Anecdotal information suggests violent crimes also are occurring more frequently; the incidence of rape in particular is on the rise, according to female contacts who know some of the victims.

[1](#)3. (C) More worryingly, reliable contacts have told us that extremists are returning to the province. Many are followers of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr who have been "hiding out" in Iran since the security crackdown that followed the deadly militia clashes that marred the Shabaniyah observances in August 2007 (ref C), according to the proprietor of an Internet cafe in Husayniyah frequented by some of the Sadrist returnees. Although the IP regularly reports the discovery of weapons and explosives caches around the province, a local journalist claims the police are failing to interdict such items smuggled in from the Islamic Republic. She said her sources in the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) believe the amount of weapons and explosives entering Karbala from Iran has increased dramatically since the beginning of February. The police academy instructor speculates that extremists here are preparing for "a big campaign," possibly timed to coincide again with Shabaniyah, when millions of pilgrims -- including tens of thousands from Iran -- will flood the province. (Note: Shabaniyah -- the commemoration of the birth of the twelfth or "hidden" imam, Mohammad al-Mahdi -- this year falls on August 5-6. End Note.)

Council Not Engaged...

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[1](#)4. (C) As ordinary Karbalans fret about security, the new Provincial Council (PC) appears detached and disinterested in addressing problems.

During a recent series of meetings with the PC, including an individual appointment with Deputy Chairman Naseyif Jassim Mohammad (State of Law), PRT members got the impression that the Council has yet to find its feet, let alone to begin working coherently on issues. Virtually to a person, the members have insisted on knowing what the QVirtually to a person, the members have insisted on knowing what the PRT will do for them while being unable to articulate what they plan to do for Karbala. The Council apparently meets twice a week, but has no set meeting days or times, frustrating the media and others who wish to hold the body accountable. According to former governor and current UNAMI representative Ali Kamonah on May 7, PC members continue to squabble over committee assignments and perquisites (ref A). He expressed pessimism that the body and its leadership will prove up to the challenge of governing Karbala.

15. (C) Although some here have pinned their hopes for action on Second Deputy Governor Yusif al-Haboubi, the provincial government's sole independent and the highest vote-getter (nationally) in January's provincial elections, his performance so far has been underwhelming. PRT members met with him on May 6 and found him to be polite and likeable, albeit lacking fire in the belly. Having served 27 years in various government roles (including as "mayor" of Karbala) under Saddam, he is a survivor, not a leader. He said he was content to serve as second deputy governor -- in his words, "the fifth most-important man" in the province -- and appears to function as the PC's institutional memory. He claimed to get on well with Governor Amal al-Din al-Hir, PC Chairman Mohammad al-Musawi, First Deputy Governor Abbas al-Musawi (who, government contacts report, has yet to show up for work), and Deputy PC Chairman Naseyif.

...Governor Detached  
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16. (C) Governor Amal al-Din al-Hir (State of Law) also has gotten off to an inauspicious start. On April 9, he raised eyebrows and free-speech concerns by ordering the closure of an exhibition by local cartoonist Salman Abed. He claimed he was forced to act because the exhibition's sponsor, the Constitutional Party, failed to obtain a permit allowing Abed to display his satiric works along one of downtown Karbala's main thoroughfares. However, the fact that the police detained and questioned Abed over one cartoon in particular--which depicted Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in a less-than-flattering light -- and then confiscated the drawing -- led many here to conclude that Amal al-Din (who belongs to Maliki's wing of the Da'wa Party) was motivated by political rather than legal considerations.

17. (C) The Governor subsequently prompted more head-scratching here by very publicly demanding the return of the al-Nukhayb region, a vast tract of desert land stretching to the Saudi border that Saddam Husayn took from Karbala and appended to al-Anbar Province in the 1970s. During an interview on al-Hurra Television last month, Amal al-Din -- a somewhat shy and retiring figure who cultivates an image of piety -- came across as slightly deranged, much to the apparent amusement of his interviewer. According to Ali Kamonah, the Governor since has dropped the issue because Maliki wants no friction among the provinces. The UNAMI representative claims that the Prime Minister has ordered Karbala and other Da'wa-run provinces to "keep quiet" in the long run-up to the Council of Representatives elections in February, 2010. He added that the apparent appeasement of Sadrist and Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) members of the PC here by giving them important committee chairmanships (ref A) stems from Maliki's desire to steer clear of potential political conflicts at all costs. Among the costs involved is security: The head of the PC's security committee, ISCI stalwart Hamad Sahib Mohammad, is known to play a leadership role in the Badr Organization and has refused to meet with the PRT.

Police Commander Conundrum  
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18. (C) Provincial IP commander MG Ali Jassim Mohammad al-Gireri also comes in for a healthy dose of criticism here. Many Karbalans initially were delighted by the light touch Gireri brought when he succeeded heavy-handed provincial ISF commander MG Ra'ad Shaker Jawdat al-Hasnawi, and particularly pleased by his elimination of some of the

roadblocks and checkpoints that constricted commerce here. However, increasing crime and fears about the return of extremists have prompted a number of our interlocutors openly to call for a return to a more draconian security regime. Gireri, a Sunni with a reputation as a womanizer, is disliked by Governor Amal al-Din as well as by Mohammad and Abbas al-Musawi, according to Kamonah. Amal al-Din attempted to engineer Gireri's ouster and replacement last month by MG Razzaq al-Ta'i, the ISF commander here before Ra'ad. However, Iraqi Army 8th Division commander LTG Uthman al-Ghanemi overruled the Governor, claiming that--because Karbala technically remains under martial law -- elements of the Provincial Powers Act giving the civilian leadership the ability to hire and fire security officials are inoperable. The Musawi brothers, meanwhile, are known to favor the return of Ra'ad and his eminence grise (and their brother) MAJ Ali al-Musawi. (Note: Ra'ad and MAJ Ali currently are serving in Wasit Province. End Note.)

¶9. (C) Kamonah claims that Gireri -- knowing full well that Amal Q9. (C) Kamonah claims that Gireri -- knowing full well that Amal al-Din and the Musawis seek to have him sacked -- has concentrated his efforts on placing loyalists in key command positions around the province. Although this may help to solidify his power base, we doubt security thereby has been enhanced. Indeed, the police academy instructor reports that Gireri's overweening focus on keeping his job is having a deleterious effect on morale within the IP, as personnel and assignment changes are made frequently and with little or no notice. The IP's image, if not its performance, also is suffering from the widespread belief here that many officers sympathize with the Sadrists or with Badr. Shaykh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i remarked on this in his Friday sermon at the Imam Husayn shrine here on May 8, stating that "it is alarming to hear that the terrorists have eyes and ears inside the security agencies (who are) providing the terrorists with very sensitive information."

Comment

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¶10. (C) With respect to security in Karbala, there is considerable smoke. We of course are disturbed by reports that extremists may be regrouping and re-arming here and troubled by the provincial leadership's disengagement. It is a particularly bad time for the IP to be distracted and not fully alert to potential threats. Nonetheless, we are hopeful that the involvement of Sadrists and ISCI members in the political process will prove effective in dissuading the disaffected fringe from resorting to violence. Given recent history, Karbalans are justified in fearing a return to the bad old days of militias run wild. The difference now though is that the overwhelming majority here is tired of the "fire" and wants to remain on the path to normalcy. This, more than anything, may fulfill Maliki's wish for Karbala to witness an extended period of political quiescence. End Comment.